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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CAR (BENT)
SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD AND J7

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [ELAB](#) [JM](#)

SUBJECT: JLP ORCHESTRATES ISLANDWIDE DAY OF PROTEST AGAINST
GOJ PRICE INCREASES; COINCIDES WITH PETROCARIBE "SUMMIT"

REF: KINGSTON 02053

Classified By: CDA Thomas C. Tighe. Reasons 1.5(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (U) On September 6, the opposition Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) carried out an island-wide demonstration against the People's National Party government, on the same day that Prime Minister P.J. Patterson was hosting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Cuban President Fidel Castro, and senior delegations from CARICOM states, the Dominican Republic, and Montserrat for the signing of the PetroCaribe agreement. In much of the capital, streets were empty and businesses closed as most residents stayed home while many held demonstrations in their communities. Actions were largely peaceful, though sporadic roadblocks, gunshots, and violence were reported across the island, and police made numerous arrests. In the aftermath, the JLP announced a successful protest, and stands prepared to do it again if the GOJ does not respond in a way that addresses the concerns that were expressed. End Summary.

JLP Calls for Peaceful Protest of Price Increases

2. (U) Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) leader Bruce Golding on September 4 called for a nationwide day of protest against the GOJ, to be held on September 6. The JLP magnanimously announced that it had pushed the protest back by 24 hours, not wanting to disrupt the traditional first day of school for Jamaican children. In any event, schools were closed nationwide on September 6, disrupting the second day of school. Probably not coincidentally, the JLP protest took place on the date of the GOJ-hosted PetroCaribe signing summit (septel) in Montego Bay, where Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Cuban President Fidel Castro were visiting with Prime Minister PJ Patterson and government leaders representing 16 Caribbean countries.

3. (C) Delroy Chuck, JLP MP and shadow justice minister, told Pol/Econ Chief late on September 3 that the JLP leadership would meet the following day in the Stony Hill section of Kingston to finalize plans for the protest. Perhaps in a moment of unintended candor, Chuck cheerfully acknowledged that the JLP had been out of the news lately and needed to "remind" voters that it remains a force. The action, explained JLP General Secretary Karl Samuda on September 4, was prompted by the GOJ's series of recent price hikes, including increases in the general consumption tax (GCT), bus fares, water, electricity, and landline telephone service. Higher prices have drawn the ire of citizens, especially the poor, who have already faced double-digit inflation rates in the past two years (reftel). In a party statement, Golding on September 6 called for the protest to be carried out "within the law."

The Capital Shuts Down, Violence Flares

4. (U) In Kingston, traffic was very light throughout the day on September 6, a sign that those residents who were not demonstrating had chosen to stay at home, either out of solidarity with protesters, or out of fear for their own safety. Some people, including Embassy employees, reported setting out for work only to find their route obstructed by manned roadblocks, forcing them to return home. The result was a capital that appeared largely deserted, with businesses shuttered for most of the day, if they opened at all, and few cars on the road.

5. (U) The media reported isolated incidents of vigorous and often dangerous demonstrations around the island, including burning roadblocks and gunfire that The Jamaica Gleaner newspaper described as "mayhem" and "pandemonium." Police reported the arrests of 35 protesters, including Spanish Town Mayor Andrew Wheatley, who was reportedly participating in a roadblock. At least one JLP Member of Parliament, Mike

Henry, was also seen supporting residents who had set up a roadblock. (Note: A PNP MP told us on September 7 that blockage of roads specifically violates the law, and that the police high command's pre-approval of the demonstrations specifically precluded roadblocks. End Note). Embassy contacts in the Jamaica Constabulary Force (JCF) reported that one police officer was shot and slightly injured in Kingston, and that at least two people were killed during the day. Some people were reportedly pulled from their cars and beaten by demonstrators.

PNP Dissuades Supporters from Involvement

16. (C) Notwithstanding the incidents that took place, Balfour Denniston, member of the People's National Party's (PNP) National Executive Committee (NEC), told Poloff at midday on September 6 that the demonstration appeared to be atypical in its moderation. He cited the country's violent gas riots in 1999, when both PNP and JLP supporters took to the streets. The PNP, said Denniston, had taken measures on Sunday, September 4, to avoid a similar scenario by discouraging its constituencies across the island from lawless behavior. He said that the party had sent its local representatives to communities to "lubricate" influential community leaders, including by "handing out money." Denniston said that the party's efforts had been successful, implying that primarily JLP supporters were causing trouble during the current demonstration. Denniston said that the JLP's call to action was not/not irresponsible, and that Golding had explicitly called for peaceful and lawful demonstrations. However, Denniston said he suspected that certain aggressive elements within the JLP, including Deputy Leader and MP James Robertson, could incite violence among demonstrators loyal to the JLP. In that case, Denniston said, volatile areas like Spanish Town and West Kingston could easily "blow up."

JLP Claims Success, Watches PNP for Response

17. (C) JLP General Secretary Karl Samuda told Poloff on September 7 that his party considered the demonstrations a success, although he did lament the fact that some protesters had become unruly. Samuda insisted that the JLP only endorsed peaceful demonstrations, but admitted that protests in Jamaica seem to be inextricably linked with road blockages and lawlessness. However, Samuda added that the protest was the first in Jamaica to be so controlled and organized at the constituency level, as opposed to past demonstrations, which have developed more spontaneously at a central location. Samuda said that the JLP was now looking forward to the September 13 session of Parliament, in which it hoped the PNP would be willing to revisit its agreement with Jamaica Power Service Company, the Mirant-owned utility whose recent price increases kicked off the protest. In addition to the electricity costs, Samuda said that unreliable power meters were also a problem that the GOJ should address.

18. (C) Samuda maintained that the September 6 PetroCaribe meetings were never discussed during the JLP's planning meetings, and that the timing was "a sheer coincidence." He also said that he was upset by the Private Sector Organization of Jamaica's (PSOJ) complaints about lost productivity during the protests. Samuda called the PSOJ hypocritical, pointing out that it had called for a day of business closures following the May 21 death of "one of their own," businessman Maurice Azan. Samuda insisted that the Jamaican people were entitled to a day of demonstration, considering that more than 1,000 people have been murdered so far this year.

Comment

18. (C) News of the JLP's call for a day of protest was greeted in some quarters with unease, as many Jamaicans recalled the infamous 1999 "gas riots" in which JLP and PNP supporters united and created widespread havoc. Others were probably happy to take a "free" day off work. Either way, the impact of the day's actions remains to be seen. On one hand, business interests lamented a day of lost productivity and the associated negative economic impact, which one economist said was likely to affect investor confidence. On the other, the JLP is willing to overlook the economic damage if the PNP takes citizens' demands seriously in Parliament. Unfortunately, GOJ action to address the people's demands will only continue to reinforce the notion in Jamaica that violence and "bangarang" are the only effective means to achieving political ends. End Comment.
TIGHE